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REGIONAL NEWS

ONLY IN L.A.

STEVE HARVEY

OK, So After That Donna Shalala Said . . .

A listener called Michael Jackson's radio show on KRLA-AM (1110) and mentioned that he was on his car phone. "Just be careful," replied Jackson's guest, Donna Shalala. She added, "L.A. makes me nervous."

As it would any secretary of Health and Human Services.

EVEN THE OCEAN LINERS ARE FREEWAY HAZARDS: The Titanic is in trouble again, having apparently veered off the 110, according to a drawing by Curt Miller **(see accompanying).** Miller won a prize from the L.A. Downtown News in a contest inspired by the arrival of the "Titanic" musical here. I hate to see the big ship flatten Angels Flight so soon after the city finally got the trolley running again.

MARDI . . . WHAT? A San Gabriel Valley church's innocent ad about a Dixieland jazz program took on a new meaning when one letter in the announcement was inadvertently changed **(see accompanying).**

URBAN MYTHS DU JOUR: Apart from the five-word answer he supposedly gave on an essay test, a couple of other legends surround Robin Williams' brief stay at Claremont McKenna College. One holds that he signaled his departure from the school by driving a golf cart through the dining hall. Williams denied that story in an interview with Dick Anderson, editor of the school's alumni magazine.

Nor is there any evidence to support another rumor: that when Williams was invited to speak on campus a few years ago, he responded with a 60-minute audio cassette filled with mad laughter.

Of course we'll never know for sure until Ken Starr says whether he has the tape.

CURT MILLER

It beats hitting an iceberg.

L.A.—YOU CAN'T ESCAPE IT! Michael Chaskes and his wife were on the Greek island of Mykonos when they suddenly felt "like we had somehow landed back on Hollywood Boulevard" **(see photo).** They didn't go inside to check the eatery's claim of being a "payless restaurant."

Later, they saw a car with a UCLA decal, leading Chaskes to comment: "I guess that Greek life on the Westwood campus is still alive and well."

TUSK, TUSK: Subscribers to the Pursuit-Watch Network, the San Dimas-based service that pages members when a police chase is on TV, had a glorious day on Wednesday. There were three. Two were simultaneous, causing some TV stations to use split screens to cover the action.

The roots of the TV police chase date back to July 4, 1958. That's the day that KTLA Channel 5 introduced the first television-transmitting helicopter, newsman Stan Chambers writes in his book "News at Ten."

One of the first assignments of the Telecopter, as it was called, was not a police chase, believe it or not. Rather it involved the coverage of 10 circus elephants marching on Hollywood Boulevard. But the chopper failed to track them down.

Chambers writes that the station's news director muttered afterward, "How do you like that? Ten elephants in the middle of Hollywood Boulevard and you can't even find one of them." Well, it's not like it was a pachyderm police pursuit.

MARDI BRAS XVI

DIXIELAND JAZZ SERVICE

How about Playtex Living Mardi Gras?

MICHAEL CHASKES

It was all Greek to them.

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In a discussion of miracles in Friday's column, I mentioned the time a gentleman conked me on the head with a beer bottle—and my amazement that the container didn't break. Naturally, wine guys Rich Roberts and Gene Hutchings had to respond that now they understand why my mug shot shows me holding my noggin.

Lawsuit Seeks Release of Child Support Funds From D.A.

By GREG KRIKORIAN and NICHOLAS RICCARDI
TIMES STAFF WRITERS

Dist. Atty. Gil Garcetti's child support office has illegally held millions of dollars owed to thousands of families, according to a lawsuit filed Friday that seeks to have the funds distributed immediately.

The lawsuit, filed by taxpayers advocate attorney Richard I. Fine, specifically targets funds that have been held—sometimes for years—by Garcetti's office, most often because it says it cannot locate the people entitled to the money.

"It isn't their money," Fine said of Garcetti's Bureau of Family Support Operations. "The money belongs to the parents."

In recent years, the district attorney's office has held as much as $25 million. The amount has dropped to about $14.5 million, since The Times asked about the fund last summer.

Victoria Pipkin, Garcetti's spokeswoman, said that because the office had not seen the lawsuit, it could not respond to the allegations. She emphasized, however, that the office has been making strides in releasing the funds, noting that the $14.5 million it held as of Feb. 1 was $2.2 million less than on the first of the year.

But Fine's lawsuit contends that Garcetti has no authority under California law to hold the funds longer than six months and that if he is unable to locate the deserving families, he is obligated after that time to return the money to non-custodial parents—usually fathers.

By illegally holding the money, Fine alleged, Garcetti's office collects hundreds of thousands of dollars in interest each year for the county.

"In the meantime, tragedies are occurring," Fine said. "Children are not being clothed and fed, families are losing their homes and being forced onto the streets and we, the taxpayers, are footing the bill."

Garcetti's office has acknowledged that it has held money in violation of the six-month requirement. "We had been," Pipkin said, "but that is no longer the case."

Garcetti's office also holds money, the lawsuit alleges, when there is a dispute between the office and a debtor parent about the amount of money owed or between the welfare office and a custodial parent about how the money should be distributed.

Fine's lawsuit was filed on behalf of John Ray Silva, who says that he has met his child support obligations but the district attorney's office filed false documents to try to collect an additional $64,000 from him.

"He represents all of the problems that the district attorney has in child support," Fine said of Silva. "They overcharged him . . . they harassed him . . . [and] his ex-wife is on his side," Fine said, citing an October 1998 affidavit in which Suzette Silva says her husband owes her nothing.

Without addressing Silva's accusations, Garcetti's spokeswoman said the office does have an active case with Silva.

The lawsuit represents the latest broadside against Garcetti's Bureau of Family Support Operations after a Times investigation last year. Among The Times' findings: Garcetti's office has held on to millions of dollars because it says it cannot locate the deserving families—families that, in several cases, The Times was able to locate using simple public records such as phone directories.

The money sits in interest-bearing accounts that accrue to the district attorney's office. At the end of the year, the federal government deducts the interest earned before it reimburses the office for its child support activities.

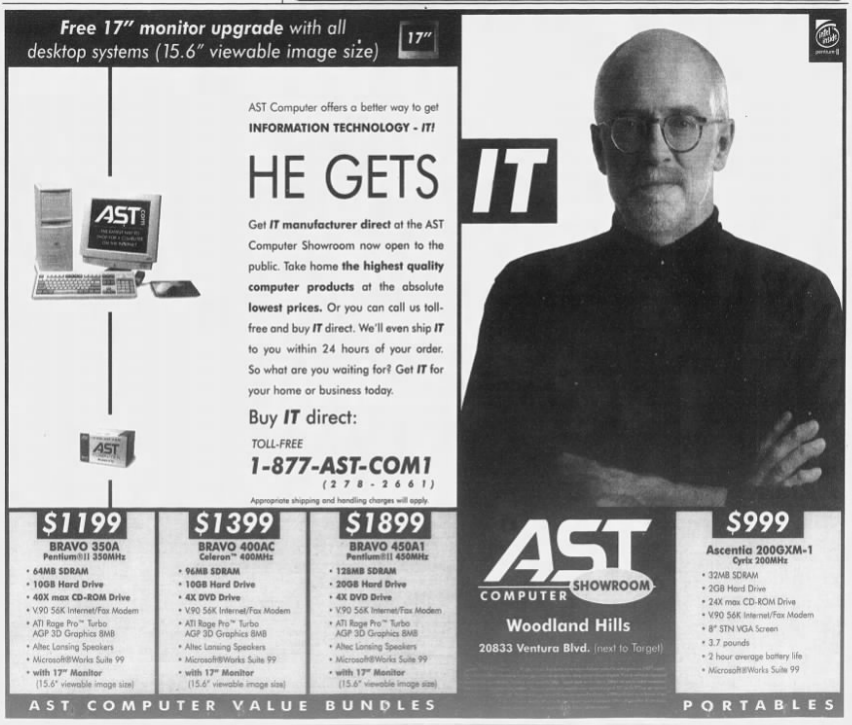
After The Times inquired about the funds last summer, Garcetti held a news conference to announce an unprecedented effort to empty the accounts. Since then, the office has stepped up its efforts to return money to parents.

But even the reduced amount, Fine said, was secondary to the basic issue: that Garcetti's office is illegally holding funds that should be distributed. Moreover, Fine said, the district attorney pledged months ago to release the money as soon as possible.

Charline Bowersox went to the Los Angeles district attorney's office in the 1970s for help collecting child support but only found out in October 1998 that the office was holding her money.

The office said it could not locate Bowersox, but a Times researcher found her in rural New Hampshire by checking phone directories. Even after her name and location were published five months ago, Bowersox did not get her money until last week, when she received a check. The sum: $146.

"They seem very reluctant to let go," Bowersox said.



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